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ABSTRACT

A brief report is given on the results of a study based on the study by E. D. Hirsch, "Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know." A sample questionnaire of 25 items from the work was submitted to 108 graduate students, of whom 85 were teachers and 23 were nonteachers. Overall, the respondents scored 24 percent out of a possible 100 percent, with the range of individual scores from 0 to 92 percent, and an item range from 2 to 74 percent. Results indicate that teachers and other educated individuals know about 25 percent of what, according to Hirsch, high school graduates should know. (JD)

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WHAT DO TEACHERS KNOW?

Robert M. Brown

A paper presented to the
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WHAT DO TEACHERS KNOW?

Most of the teachers, and for that matter, most of the non-teachers, some 98%, in fact, were surprised to find that Russian was written in the Cyrillic alphabet, this was just one of the 25 items on a quiz from Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy; What Every American Needs To Know.*

Students in the now famous report "What Do Our 17-Year Olds Know," that thought Toronto was a city in Italy and the Alamo was a Greek epic poem. In this present study some teachers thought Copenhagen was in France, and that Captain Cook had but one arm and was pursued by an alligator -- perhaps the one who had swallowed an alarm clock.

Cultural illiteracy is a new term and refers to people who do reasonably well at "calling words" but understand little of what they have read. Hirsch sparked a national furor when he suggested that the United States was becoming a land of not only illiterates, but also cultural illiterates. He felt the schools' fragmented, skill-oriented curriculum had given up teaching unifying values and facts which determine our culture. Further, skills were taught in isolation and were separated from solid content, which he felt this was the root problem of American education over the past several decades, and the prime reason for low test scores among all our students, especially minority students.

Many argue there are no uses for history, and it does not matter if the students know or do not know of the "War of Jenkin's Ear," or if they read Shakespeare, or if they are ignorant of geographic facts. Hirsch's major villains are John Dewey and Jean-Jaques Rousseau, who expounded a content neutral, skills-based curriculum, which resulted in the decoding of words, but as Hirsch contends, they lack the necessary content or understanding to put what they have read into a broad context.

Around 1972 Hirsch and his co-workers, Joseph Kett and James Trefil, started on research projects to provide evidence that a strong background of knowledge was necessary in the understanding of language. They eventually came up with a list of 4,622 names, phrases, places, historical events, dates, and books which they felt all high-school students should know.

As soon as the book was published critics swarmed over the list like a plague of locust -- cultural knowledge cannot be catalogued; no Hispanic terms were used; no black terms; no native American terms -- and plethora of other castigations. Many felt Hirsch was out of touch with current conditions and catered to just the middle class and a historical middle

class at that! His list, for instance, did not mention "Bon Jovi" or even Richard Petty.

The creators of the list said it was just a starting place and there were likely some omissions. However, it was a good starting place and they would be pleased to see other lists or suggestions. Hirsch still contends that the road to cultural literacy must be paved with a general agreement on a body of cultural knowledge that all citizens must share, and this knowledge must be available to all young children and their teachers alike.

So it was decided to take a selection from the list and try it on a group of teachers and non-teachers to answer the question: "What do Teachers know?"

Methodology

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire which consisted of 25 statements from the "c section" of the list, which consisted of approximately 400 plus terms. Within the "c" category the 25 terms were chosen by a computer generated list of random numbers. A letter category was used because it simplified locating the words the computer had chosen. It was easier to count and find 25 words out of 400 than 25 words out of 4000 plus. And the test itself was a simple "fill-in-the -blanks" type. For example, "Copenhagen_____."

The subjects were 108 graduate students who made up four sections of an introductory course in educational inquiry, and of that number 23 were not teachers.

Grading was not as simple as it would appear as there were answers and then there were answers. For instance, on question asked about James Fennimore Cooper. Only sixteen percent identified him as an author who wrote, among other things, the "*Leather Stocking Tales*," or who identified "Hawkeye" as a Cooper character or something else fairly specific to Cooper. Nine percent identified him as an American author; 15 percent identified him as an author/writer; five percent identified him as a writer of such things as "Hiawatha" and the like, but nonetheless an author; and three percent were just wrong, identifying him as a doctor or a president, while the remaining 52 percent left it blank. In a broad sense 45 percent knew he was an author of some sort so the final tally was as follows:

Correct	16%
American author	09
Some type of author	15

Author, but wrong titles	05
Wrong	03
Left answer blank	52
Total	100

This procedure was followed with other questions in the study.

Results

Overall the students scored 24% out of a possible 100%. The range of the scores of individuals was from zero percent to 92% correct.
The range on individual items was from two percent correct to 80% correct.
There was no significant difference between teachers and non-teachers ($t = .39$, $P > .35$).
There appeared to be no correlation between years of teaching experience, which ranged from one to over 15, and test score ($R = .01$, $P > .91$).

Individual Items

The first item asked the students to identify Conan Doyle, Sir Arthur. Twenty percent correctly identified him as the creator of Sherlock Holmes Other responses included: "Knight of the Round Table," "Wrote Tarzan," "Head of the knights of the Round Table," or "Friend to Robin Hood."

The second item concerned "conduction" and was correctly answer by 45%, although some thought it was "The art of conducting an orchestra."

Only five percent were in the ball park on *Confessions of St. Augustine*. Most left it blank but some hazarded guesses such as "City in Florida," to "A priest listening to confessions."

Congo River and its location was correctly noted by 50% of the students, while others placed it in France, Brazil or "In the Nile."

"Connotation" was correctly answer by 44%, while others knew it as "An English term," "A summary," or "Quoting a saying."

"Joseph Conrad," was unknown to 90% of the respondents, although one felt he was Robert Conrad's brother and another knew knew was an actor.

"Conspicuous Consumption: was identified as "A particularly pernicious type of flu or drink." Some seven percent correctly identified it as Thorstein Veblen's economic concept.

Eleven percent identified "Constantine The Great," while others noted that he was a "Wonderful person," "King in the Dark Ages," or "Early Ruler of Russia."

"Continental Congress" scored high with 43% correctly identifying it, while others felt it was the "Congress of the continent," or "A branch of the English government."

"Continental Drift" was identified by 32%, although one felt it had to do with "Air Flow."

"Contralto" was identified somewhat broadly by 30%, although it was also identified as a type of "Musical" or "Musical tempo."

Everyone had a go at "Captain Cook," but only 17% got it right. Others felt "He had a hook in his arm," "An American pirate," " A character in *Treasure Island*," "Sought Moby Dick," "Was a character in *Peter Pan*," "One-legged shipmate," and finally "Discovered the North Pole."

"Corsica" was in Italy, Greece, the Middle East, Spain, or a "Lost City," but was finally identified by five percent.

"Copenhagen" was in France, Germany, Sweden, or Holland. It was also identified as a "Prison," or "An island of coconuts." Of course, it was also identified as famous brand of snuff. Copenhagen was correctly identified by 44%, if snuff were counted, and 32% if snuff were not counted.

"*Coup de grace*" was identified by six percent and brought such outliers as "With much grace," "To make a point," "Victory," or "Weakness."

"*Coup d'etat*" was identified by 20%, in addition to being listed as "Very smart," "A group meeting,' or "Not grateful."

"Court of St. James" was "In the Vatican," "Rome," or "The place where the King James Bible was written," until finally being nailed down by eight percent.

"Corinthian order (of architecture)" was correctly answered by 15%, accompanied by such comments as "A fraternity of builders."

"Croesus, Rich as," was identified by three percent with no outrageous guesses.

"Cupid (Eros)" scored the highest with 80% answering correctly

"Cyclops" was identified by 46% as a one-eyed monster, although one or two thought it was a "Machine," or a "Three-eyed monster."

"Cyrillic alphabet" was identified by only two percent with some feeling it had to do with "Braille."

"Cooper, James Fennimore" was known to 16 percent and variously identified as "a president," "author of The Forsythe Saga, Hiawatha, or Peck's Bad Boy." Some thought he was an actor or an inventor.

"Covelant bond"was identified by 19% percent, with one feeling it was a term for "Blood brother."

"Finally we come to the end of the questions and finish with "Curie, Marie," who was all over the place. She was identified as "A bacteria," "A prize," "A nurse," "A famous madam [in the infamous sense]" "An Italian doctor," "A medium," "Cure for rabies," "Anesthesia," or "The discoverer of penicillin." Eventually she was correctly identified by 21 percent.

So, evidently this sample of teachers and others, with somewhat more than the usual trappings of education, knew about 25% of what high-school students should know -- according to Hirsch.